

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems by Countée Cullen, Lena Hall, Margaret
Larkin, Edward Sapir and Others -----

“Spring Thunder” Reviewed -----

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Hunger

BREAK me no bread however white it be;
It cannot fill the emptiness I know;
No wine can cool this desert thirst in me,
Though it had lain a thousand years in snow;
No swooning lotus flower's languid juice
Drips anodyne unto my restlessness,
And impotent to win me to a truce
Is every artifice of loveliness.

Inevitable is the way I go,
False-faced amid a pageant permeate
With bliss, yet visioning a higher wave
Than this weak ripple washing to and fro;
The fool still keeps his dreams inviolate
Till their virginity espouse the grave.

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Colors

RED

SHE went to buy a brand new hat,
And she was ugly, black, and fat.
"This red becomes you well," they said,
And perched it high upon her head;
And then they laughed behind her back
To see it glow against the black;
She payed for it with regal mien,
And walked out proud as any queen.

BLACK

1

THE play is done; the crowds depart; and see,
That twisted tortured thing hung from a tree,
Swart victim of a newer Calvary.

2

Yea, he who helped Christ up Golgotha's track,
That Simon who did *not* deny, was black.

THE UNKNOWN COLOR

I'VE often heard my mother say,
When great winds blew across the day,
And, cuddled close and out of sight,
The young pigs squealed with sudden fright
Like something speared or javelined,
"Poor little pigs, they see the wind."

The Spark

“S TAMP hard; be sure
We leave no spark
That may allure
This placid dark.
At last we learn
That love is cruel;
Fire will not burn
Lacking fuel.
Here, take your heart,
The whole of it,
I want no part,
No smallest bit.
And this is mine?
You took scant care;
My heart could shine;
No glaze was there.
Young lips hold wine
The fair world over;
New heads near mine
Will dent the clover;
We need not pine
Now this is over.
Now love is dead,
We might be friends;
'Tis best instead
To say all ends.
And when we meet,
Pass quickly by;
Oh, speed your feet,
And so will I . . .
I knew a man
Thought a spark was dead
That flamed and ran
A brighter red,
And burned the roof
Above his head.

Countée Cullen

Answer

HAD I been one of those proud lilies
When he said "Consider,"
I would have shot up to a star, quick with red!

Or had I been a small loaf near a dazed multitude,
I would have widened with laughter's leaven
Till the grass was fed!

But if I had been thorns in that crown,
I would have shrunk with shame
Till a tree died alone, without a name.

Himself

HE was not modeled by a pattern set
With hand restrained upon the ordered years.
Ten standard asters hurt his eyes. His ears
Were pained by major thirds. He could forget,—
Swift as a young June drops the violet,—
That sea of waving white, trumpeting cheers,
Honor that scales a height and disappears
Before the early fields lie cool and wet.

His path lay out of line. An unclassed flower,
Sole of its kind upon a perilous crag,
His language knew; and hour by patient hour,
Loosing the molded forms that dull and drag,
He built a place, nor cared that his strange tower
Drew hound and archer like a sharpened stag.

Lena Hall

Words to be Graven on Sandstone

NOT with a snarl of bronze and a crackle of drums,
Not as a clean blade clips a cord asunder,
Never in such a forthright guise death comes
To quench the flame and plough the compost under.
Not so. We die in ways obscure and little.
I am less man this hour than yesterday;
More than I shall be soon. The slow years whittle,
With rusty knives, body and brain away.

Some day above these bones, a granite lie,
My unimportant name may stand in stone.
Fools, I have died these decades past, and I
Am ash in tombs unnumbered and unknown,
Spoil of the seas, prey to the wind's dissection,
Scattered too far for any resurrection.

Ted Olson

Epitaph for Lovers

THEY do not gaze at suns
Who sleep beneath the ground;
A vine creeps on his mound
Where her fond hand was once.

Charles Norman

Duel by Lamplight

THE contours of a courteous lie
Dissolve before her level look,
He has no rule to gauge her by,
(She's not a person in a book).

Would you be worthy of my trust,
(Her calm demeanor indicates),
Why do you wriggle in the dust?
Men love me by no devious hates.

Mine is no chastity to be
Affrighted by your naked words,
Old prejudices thrive in me
Enamored of the sound of swords.

Put by this mask of suave deceit,
Artifice ill becomes your face,
Refrain from worshipping my feet
And woo me with a warm embrace.

Too late. His courage cannot rise
But nurses visionary wings.
Evading her attentive eyes
He speaks of other things.

Commentator

BRING the chapter to a close:
Time would whet
One by one his yellow teeth
On the labor you bequeath
And would fret
Pages you cannot forget
To a blasted rose.
Soon will come the day
None may read
In the tortured text thereof
What was your consuming love.
Even though the fingers bleed
Wherwith you sow the seed,
Time filches it away.

Bernard Raymund

Platonic

YOU are to me no deeper than a friend.

Together through the purpling streets we stroll
And speak things intellectual in droll,
Sophisticated fashion. You can send
Your voice's cutting puissance to my brain
And there corrode an everlasting groove;
But never does your ardent body move
To swamp my senses like a sweeping rain.

We find the hand a useful instrument
For greeting and farewell: we are no prey
To maudlin throbbing or romance; we say
Such things are for the folk of trivial bent.
And when we separate, not your wild hair
Pursues me, but your maxim on despair.

Puck

YOU catapult a ceaseless fusillade
Of darting witty phrases, lately culled;
Unmindful of your audience, undismayed
By cold reception, you are never dulled
To silence, but go lightly, quickly on,
As if you felt it requisite to play
The cosmic entertainer Never wan,
You flaunt your ruddy countenance each day.

Do you pass all your nights within a room
Assorting jests within you, and composing
New mirth wherewith to banish earthly gloom?
O tireless fellow, are you never dozing?
You are as reprehensible as those
Who spend their days concocting further woes.

Emanuel Eisenberg

Over a Dead Poet

THREE was in him no factual trace of sin,
Here was a child, a subtly wayward one at that,
Lacking all sense of appropriate discipline,
Loving color and contour, despising the dull, the flat.

If he were forced at times to be cruelly clever,
He wrapped his sword-point in lint lest blood fall on the ground,
He was both too strong and too weak completely to sever
Evil from good, he was too versatile to be profound.

He never wore dirty collars by choice nor adopted loud socks,
He loathed the arid sham, the melancholy middle-class tie,
Here was no daring aphorism, no disturbing paradox,
R. I. P. Life did rather well in letting him die.

Paul Tanaquil

Music

“WHAT is our life?” profoundly gesturing,
“Let us forget!” they said, unanimous.—
The strings are the most chastely amorous
Of dreamers, 'tis the watery flutes that sing
Of the lily-footed girls, the oboes bring
The mountain sleep to the voluptuous,
Romancing horns. Round this oblivious
Desire drums threaten and the trumpets ring.

Who are these forty gentlemen of toys,
Graver than dolls, graver than pirate boys?
Who are these shining gentlemen of brief
Commotion? What is their intense belief?—
“Now what is life?” Take then the dream of joys!
“Let us forget!” Take but the lilt of grief!

For One a Little Awkward of Speech

GIVE ear to the unfinished word
If you would guess his finished house,
So rich that for the nesting bird
He treasures, and the unseen mouse.

His hospitality is wise,
A harmless liar on the tongue;
Somewhere in hiding in the eyes,
It will not hear long praises sung.
His voice will teach you and the slow
Enkindling silences. His speech
Is only a random throw,
Salute and welcome from the breach.

Edward Sapir

Poem

HOW can it be that I should love you still,
In moments swift and unquestioning as before?
Love begins with nothing and ends with nothing
And is no more.

With my new love I have found the beginning of beauty,
And for my passionate heart a quiet, shut place,
Yet when he comes in dreams and I look at him dreaming,
I see your face!

Margaret Larkin

Cantrip

SCOOP a crescent in your side
Beckon her to come;
I will nestle in the wide
Hollow of your thumb.

She will bring you gold and land,
Dulia and youth;
I will surely bite your hand
With a wicked tooth.

Round your heart her heart will twine
—I am much too clever—
You will worship at my shrine
Forever and forever.

Margaret Tod Ritter

Silence

IHAVE lain in the dark
And listened
To the thin, high shrilling
Of blood in the veins of my ears,
And I have wondered
What pure silence is.

Sometime I shall know pure silence
And clean sound,
Not blurred by the clamor of my own flesh. . . .
Shall I know how to bear it?

Sibyl Croly Hanchett

Toward Thaw

HOW shall we bear it if snow-flattened grass
Lift its watery points out of the sod;
If the slim crocus, pushing through clouded glass,
Break petalled color from its delicate rod?
What shall we hurt ones do for breath, having held,
Knotted against the throat, a threaded net
Of cold, unhappy air that never smelled
Of the good ground from which roots suck their wet?
O may the sun but slowly elevate
Its arc to April's height, and slowly draw
The winter-stiffened heart to its new state
For fear of flood that follows too quick thaw.

H. A. Farman

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Spring Thunder

Spring Thunder and Other Poems. By Mark Van Doren; Thomas Seltzer; 1924

The title poem of this first book of verses initiates an atmosphere of classic restraint in subject and imagery which is persistent throughout the book, moulding the whole into a solidarity which will be either langorously satisfying or egregiously monotonous, according to the reader's apperceptive mood. Fortunately, we opened the volume at a time when relaxation was imperative; on the first page we were soothed to "hear the edge of winter crumble" in *Spring Thunder*; and we were able to extend our sense of gratitude to the end.

In a day when everyone is solving a problem or grinding the clichéd axe, Mr. Van Doren shuns the general tumult for reflection on things generally esteemed of slight interest in themselves—simple people, pleasant places, the flirtatious weather, and the shy, sensitive animal world. This poet is happiest when he is painting a picture, and his finished product is generally arresting, while never startling or over-drawn. One can almost see the blue pencil deleting any spry expression which might be trembling on the verge of an Olympian ecstasy.

Mr. Van Doren is essentially a lyricist, and his short, singing verses like *Immortal*, *Alfalfa Coming*, and *Noblesse* (which comes

perilously near being jaunty despite Mr. Van Doren's wary hand) quite overshadow his more ambitious creations in blank verse. In fact, these latter are somewhat annoying and paradoxically inconsistent with the poet's manifest precision; for they insist upon frequent excursions off meter. Blank verse may present difficulties of organization and sound, but it is the easiest matter in meterdom to stress it correctly. One has only to count on his fingers, and, in a pinch, to juggle his inversions. Mr. Van Doren, to his credit, seems deliberately to eschew inversions, so we must put his defection down to carelessness. And that is no slight indictment; for if carelessness is unpardonable in blank verse, it is especially so when evinced in an otherwise perfect lyric like *Noblesse*, the second stanza of which, beginning:

Weeds, arriving everywhere,
Are insolent as soon as come,

calls for repeated perusal before the light breaks, a serious detraction from lyric value, The last stanza is perfect, telling

How blue-grass is the gentlest born
Of all the gentle things that stand,
Holding, without a spear or thorn,
Hereditary land.

Those of us who mourn the passing of the brownies and fairies need lament no longer. We need but read Mr. Van Doren's *To a Child With Eyes* (a poem as magical as the child verses of Walter de la Mare; yet exclusive enough not to be specifically reminiscent of him) to find that all mystery has not fled with the fays. Although

The commonwealth is gone that shut
Its felons in a hazel-nut,

Mr. Van Doren delightfully and simply explains that much still remains to be seen:

There is the squirrel. There is the bee.
There is the chipmink on the wall,
And the first yellow every fall.
There is the humming-bird, the crow.
There is the lantern on the snow.
There is the new-appearing corn.
There is the cold a minute born
Run and see, and say how many—
There are more if there is any.

It is a rare first book of poems which doesn't devote half its pages to lauding or defaming the blind bow-boy. *Spring Thunder* is such a rarity. The oldest theme in the world is almost entirely ignored by Mr. Van Doren. Yet, *Alteration*, one of the poems which has insisted upon staying with us, seems to be a splendid symbolism of the end of love. It may be that we are reading too much into a poems which means no more than it says, but if we divest the lines of their suggestiveness, little remains to commend them. If symbolic, the poem is fine enough to quote in its entirety.

ALTERATION

I did not ask to have the shed
Pulled down, although it leaned so sickly.
But, now the proper word is said,
Let it come quickly.

Bring rope and pulley, axe and bar,
And while you hammer I will pry.
Shingles can be sent as far
As feathers fly.

Naked beams can tumble faster
Than cobwebs in a sudden gust;
Floors can stand on end; and plaster
Soon is dust.

I did not think this valley-view
Deserved that any roof should fall.
But, now the word is said by you,
I want it all.

Mr. Van Doern's volume is not noisy, but its echo lingers in the inner self after the slight reverberations have ceased. One coming to this book in need of calm and quiet will find much to meet his approval, and nothing at all for unqualified censure.

Countée Cullen

Contributors

COUNTEE CULLEN writes of himself that he is a New Yorker, colored, a student at New York University, and that for two years he has won second prize in the Witter Bynner undergraduate poetry contest. His long poem, "The Shroud of Color," in a recent number of *The American Mercury*, attracted much attention.

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H. A. FARMAN, well known in other periodicals, is new to *The Measure*.

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